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ABSTRACT

An often overlooked problem in corrections is the way children are influenced by their parents' incarceration. Although in the past prisons were more tolerant of parent-child relationships, since the 1970's until recently, the prevailing philosophy has been to keep children separated from their incarcerated parents. Because of the shift from extended to nuclear family structures, which reduces opportunities for child care continuity, such separations pose many problems. Frequently, the incarcerated parent is the family's primary bread winner, and the family may suffer financial hardship, as well as loss of emotional support. The stigma attached to imprisonment means that the loss of the incarcerated parent elicits little sympathy and does not draw family members closer together. Further, children are affected by the stigma whether or not their parents tell them the truth about the imprisonment. Children are often reluctant to discuss the incarcerated parent's whereabouts with anyone, leading to isolation from peers. Regardless of the sex of the incarcerated parent, inmates report behavior problems in their children. While privileges vary widely from one institution to another, a few innovative programs are being initiated, generally focusing on mother-child relations. These programs may help eradicate the negative effects of parental imprisonment. (WAS)

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THE FORGOTTEN SUFFERERS: CHILDREN OF INMATES

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

An often overlooked problem in corrections is the way children are influenced by their parents' incarceration. As the number of prisoners continues to rise, particularly among women, the scope of the problem broadens. An estimated 70 to 80 percent of convicted women are mothers. There are at least 21,000 children in America whose mothers are incarcerated on any one day (Harris, 1982).

The number of children left behind by men in prison is certainly larger than this, since a much greater proportion of the prison population is composed of men. While there are no nationwide statistics on the number of male prisoners who are fathers, in one recent year's time, 774 newly convicted men in Oregon left behind a total of 988 children (Sack, 1977). The same ratio throughout the nation would yield over 600,000 children with fathers incarcerated in state and federal prisons.

Prisons used to be more tolerant of parental-child relationships. In the 1700's, English prisons permitted mothers to keep their children with them. Female prisoners who were transported from Britian to Australia in the early 1800's were accompanied by their children under the age of seven. Things began to change in the mid-1800's. By this time, British prisons no longer allowed mothers to keep their children with them unless they were born in prison. Infants born in prison were allowed to remain with their mothers until they were six years old. In the early 1900's a few American institutions permitted infants to remain with their mothers. In the 1920's several training facilities for delinquent girls had infants on their premises (Stanton, 1980). After

this time, and until very recently, the prevailing philosophy has been to keep children separated from incarcerated parents.

Parent-child separation in today's society poses problems. The shift from an extended to a nuclear family structure has placed the responsibility of attending to the needs of children directly on the shoulders of the mother and father. In Sack's (1977) study of six imprisoned men, five of the six wives complained about the lack of support from their in-laws. They said that aithough they lived in the same community, their in-laws did little to help with their financial or child-care problems.

The incarcerated parent is frequently the primary bread winner in the family. In fact, many of the crimes parents are incarcerated for stem directly from their need to support a family. For example, in Stanton's (1980) study of women prisoners and probationers, the majority of women were guilty of trying to support a family through illegal activity. Their crimes ranged from petty and grand theft to forgery, embezzelment, credit card offenses, and welfare fraud. Twenty-five percent were convicted of narcotics offenses, a trade which they dealt in as a primary means of helping to support their families. Those convicted of welfare fraud were most often guilty of not reporting all sources of income.

Although we do not like to admit it, many fathers arrive in prison after making an unsuccessful illegal attempt at boosting the family income during a time of financial hardship. Sack (1977) reported that all six men in his study were involved in forms of theft designed to increase their income. In Schneller's (1976) study of 93 black inmates, 56 of the wives reported that their family incomes had decreased after

their husbands' incarceration and 46 of these said it had decreased a great deal. Hence, whether money is derived from illegal sources or not, over half of the incarcerated married men have been helping to support their families.

Parent-child separation due to imprisonment differs from other forms of family detachments primarily because of the stigma attached. Separations due to death or illness may disrupt the family unit, but they also provide a concern around which the remaining family members can rally and mitigate the impact of their loss. By contrast, the loss of a family member due to imprisonment rarely elicits a sympathetic response from others, nor is it the kind of crisis that serves to draw members of the immediate family closer together. There appears to be a demoralization connected with imprisonment which is not to be found in other forms of involuntary separation other than perhaps desertion. Imprisonment carries a stigma which is difficult for families to eradicate, especially when children are involved.

Families are often reluctant to disclose the whereabouts of the imprisoned member. The most common stories told by parents who choose not to tell their children are that they are going to the hospital or going to work. This deception often compounds the problem when children learn of their parents' true whereabouts through other sources. In one instance, a boy learned about his father's imprisonment via a newspaper story (Sack, 1977). Many children learn about a parent's being in prison from classmates as school.

While most parents do tell their children about their imprisonment, a sizeable number try to hide the truth. In a British study (Morris, 1965), 38 percent of the wives said that their children had no idea that

their father was in prison; another 12 percent said that only the older children knew, and two percent said they were doubtful that their children knew.

Stanton (1980) found that only 12 percent of the children who had mothers in jail did not know of their true location. In 45 percent of these cases, the child was present when the mother was arrested. Among probation mothers, 40 percent of the children had been present at the time of arrest; however, 58 percent of these children had no idea of the legal status of their mother. Fritsch and Burkhead (1981), in a study of 97 inmate families, discovered that 36 percent of the children had no idea that the parent was in prison.

The studies show that children are reluctant to discuss the whereabouts of an incarcerated parent with anyone. A majority of children do not tell others about the location of their parent. While nondisclosure may contribute somewhat to a sense of family unity, it also tends to isolate a child from his peers. Of those children who do tell others, most distort their discussion with some sort of evasion. The few children who openly acknowledge their parent's crime and conviction report being teased and bullied over it.

The child of an incarcerated parent, therefore, is placed in a bind. If the child is not told of his mother's or father's imprisonment, he does not suffer from the stigma of knowing they are in prison. Furthermore, he is not as likely to be plagued with behavioral problems. However, if the child is not told, and happens to find out from another source, the evidence indicates that he is even more scarred than if the parents had dealt with him in an honest manner from the beginning.

There has been some study of whether the absence of the mother or father is more detrimental to a child. In Fritsch and Burkhead's (1981) study, a total of 124 child-related problems in 91 families had arisen since imprisonment. In terms of number of problems per child, male and female inmates report almost the same number. However, incarcerated fathers experience different types of problems with their children. For instance, 32.6 percent of the problems reported by male subjects related to discipline compared to only 7.7 percent reported by female respondents.

The types of problems children had were classified into two categories. The first was so-called "acting-out" behavior and included hostility, use of drugs or alcohol, running away, school truancy, discipline problems, aggressive acts and involvement in delinquent activities. The other category, "acting-in" behavior, includes patterns characteristic of withdrawal such as daydreaming, unwillingness to play, acting babyish, fear of school, a drop in school work, crying a lot, and nightmares.

It is interesting and understandable that male and female parents report problems with children in precisely those areas where they would traditionally accept major responsibility. The absence of the father, the traditional disciplinarian, leads to "acting-out" problems. The absence of the mother, whose traditional function is to nurture and provide emotional support, contributes to "acting-in" behavior.

The sex of the incarcerated parent was associated with these different types of behavioral responses regardless of whether parental absence precipitated the problematic behavior or simply aggravated and caused pre-existing behavioral tendencies to become more pronounced.

Furthermore, the tendency of children of absent fathers to "act-out" and of absent mothers to "act-in" was shown to be related to whether their children were aware that separation was due to incarceration (McCord, McCord and Thurber, 1964).

Problems associated with "acting-out" are more noticable to other family members, school teachers, classmates, and social workers because they have a more disruptive nature than do "acting-in" behaviors. For example, a teacher would be more likely to contact a student's parent about an undisciplined and rowdy act than if the child were silent and withdrawn. Hence, problems brought on by the absence of a father may attract greater attention than those brought on by the absence of a mother.

The oldest son in the family is often the most strikingly affected by a father's absence. Often he reacts by internalizing the role of his absent father. Since the father has been labeled bad and dangerous, the oldest son often adopts behavior which he thinks of as bad. This is particularly true in families where divorce follows imprisonment of the father. The incarceration of the father is an opportune time for the mother to bail out of a failing marriage. With the father gone, she can air her views to the children about how bad their father is. Often, apparently, this has the ironic effect of making the oldest son want to be like his father (Sack, 1977).

Boys clearly feel a need to identify with the role the absent father is presumed to have. Obviously this has some negative consequencies when the son internalizes the role model of a convicted felon whether it is his father or not. Moerk (1973) did a study in which 24 boys from divorced homes were matched with 24 boys from homes with an imprisoned

father. He found that the children with imprisoned fathers were more delinquent and less similar to the norm group than were the children from divorced families.

In most cases, when the father is incarcerated, he is greatly missed by his children. In some instances, however, his departure is a welcome relief. Incest cases fall into this category. And from a financial vantage point, removal of the man from a household where he is not spending his money on his family may actually enable a family to improve its financial situation by qualifying for public assistance.

Children of imprisoned fathers have perhaps one important advantage over children with incarcerated mothers. The mother is usually still there to be the primary guardian and she can often become the breadwinner of the family. More often than among men, incarcerated mothers are the child's sole guardian. Thus, when the mother is imprisoned the children must find somewhere else to live. Consequently, children of women prisoners usually experience many disruptions. A study of 60 imprisoned mothers in the Washington, D.C. area, found that while some children were living with their fathers, the majority had been farmed out by agencies to relatives, family friends, foster homes or institutions (Slade, 1978).

In the Los Angeles area, a study of women prisoners and their children (Zalba, 1964) showed that 64 percent had undergone at least one change in residence since their mother's incarceration. Fifty-five percent of the children were living with their relatives (generally grandparents), 25 percent were living with their fathers, and 20 percent were living in foster homes.

Not only are many children shuffled about from one living arrangement to another, some are also separated from their siblings. In Stanton's study (1980), 31 percent of the children were separated from each other, and Zalba (1964) found that 56 percent of the children had been separated from one or more of their siblings.

The ordeal of moving around is compounded for school-age children. Not only do they have to adjust to a new home, they have to adjust to a new school and to making new friends. One study (Stanton, 1980) found that 70 percent of the children with mothers in jail were in the bottom third of their class. Only 17 percent of the children with mothers on probation were in the bottom third of their class. Therefore, probation seems much less harmful to the children than does incarceration. It goes without saying that probation should be used whenever possible where children are concerned.

Although incarcerated mothers may have good intentions about staying informed about their children, the studies show that jailed mothers lose awareness of their children's activities. The physical separation is the main factor, but it is exacerbated by the lack of proper visiting facilities, limitations on frequencies of visits, and the paucity of telephone calls a woman can make.

For many women, the problems of money and distance make visits impossible. For such a woman, letters and telephone calls become the only link to her family and these are often very limited. At the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, for example, an inmate is permitted only two five-minute telephone calls per month (Harris, 1982). In one year's time, an inmate has only 120 minutes to talk on the telephone to her family, all of her children, and her lawyer. In many jails, incoming

calls are not permitted. In many facilities, there is only one telephone for the use of all inmates.

Letter writing is an option readily available to all inmates but Stanton (1980) found that one-third of imprisoned mothers never wrote their children. Usually, letter writing is an uncommon form of communication between parents and children due to the young age of the children. Many children are too young to read; also they cannot answer letters which they receive and must have read to them by others.

Visitation privileges for inmates vary widely from one correctional facility to another in the United States. In some, children under 16 or 18 are not allowed to visit their parents because it is believed that the experience is too traumatic. In others, parents who are still awaiting trial are denied visitations. As visiting privileges stand in many jurisdictions, the authorities are right when they say visiting would be traumatic for small children. Often, the parties are separated by two thick screens, with a small glass panel to see through. Because of the height of the glass and panel, the arrangement is awkward for children. There is no privacy and sometimes conversations have to be shouted to be heard over the sounds of others. Mothers' reactions to visits in such places are understandably negative. In a 1980 study (Stanton), 55 percent of the inmates in such institutions reported having no visits at all, and none had frequent visits.

A few institutions have areas more accommodating to parent-child visits. While telephone calls are a problem at Bedford Hills, there is a Parenting Center there where children can enjoy playing with their mothers in a nursery atmosphere. At other institutions, such as the Nebraska Women's Reformatory, the Minnesota Correctional Institution for

Women, and Mississippi's Parchman, children are encouraged to visit and are allowed to spend an occasional weekend with their mothers.

It has long been recognized that the existance of a supportive family relationship is one of the few factors that can be shown to have a desirable influence on recidivism. A report prepared by the California Department of Corrections (Stanton, 1980) showed that frequent visits and the maintenance of strong family ties while in prison lead to better parole success. Not unimportantly, frequent visits also contribute to the chances of being paroled.

The importance of preserving family relationships has been recognized by both the American Bar Association and the American Correctional Association. However, there is still very little being done to activitate this recognition. In the great majority of American prisons today, visitation is considered a nuisance by the staff members, and inmates with children have no more privileges than single prisoners. While there is talk about preserving family relationships, there is actually very little being done.

In many places, in fact, incarcerated parents experience much anxiety over their future parental rights. In Florida, Illinois, Montana, New York, and Wyoming, unless statutes have changed recently, incarceration is sufficient, in and of itself, to permit termination of parental rights. In Maryland, Washington, Oregon, and New Jersey, imprisonment of a parent is equated with abandonment of parental responsibilities (Stanton, 1980).

While parents are often stripped of their child-rearing rights during incarceration, the law makes no provisions for their children. When an arrest is made, police officers do not have to inquire if there

are children. If, for example, the mother is detained, the care of the children falls on the family, relatives, and neighbors or on the children themselves. Children are not often taken into consideration at the time of court procedures. Even if a court chooses to consider children, no procedure exists for the court to follow. If the children are considered at all, it is in the presentence report filed by the probation department. After a background investigation is conducted and a sentence is recommended, no further action is taken if the mother is sent to jail. The court ordinarily assumes no responsibility for the child's placement during incarceration. This presents a particularly difficult problem for mothers who are unmarried and must act alone in providing for their children. The state becomes totally responsible for the mother but the child is in effect forgotten.

It has been suggested that intergenerational cycles of criminality exist. The lack of proper, responsible adult care is obviously a factor in a child's becoming delinquent. In Stanton's study (1980), 44 percent of the imprisonment mothers had parents or siblings who had been incarcerated. A study by Colinger and Goze (Rubenstein, 1980) reported that of 66 convicted female felons, 20 percent had had a father in jail or prison, and 9 percent had had a mother in jail or prison. Clearly, incarceration of a parent can have negative influences on the life of a child. Obviously, more must be done in attempting to eradicate the ill effects of parental imprisonment.

Fortunately, there are a few innovative programs being initiated. The majority of these focus on mother-child relations. One example of such a program can be found at the Purdy Treatment Center in Washington. Inmate's children are placed in foster homes close to the

prison and mothers participate in the selection of the homes. Children are encouraged to visit in the women's living quarters and mothers are permitted to visit the foster homes. A nursery school is operated at the institution four days a week for children from the neighboring community and once a week for children of inmates.

Education for mothers is emphasized in child development classes in the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women and the Ohio Reformatory for Women. The Nebraska Center for Women and the Arizona State Prison have Mother-Offspring Life Development (MOLD) programs. These include children's overnight visits at the institutions, child care classes, counseling and evaluation. The Minnesota Correctional Institution for Women has a program called Second Chance. It includes weekend visits for children, weekly seminars, discussion groups, counseling, assistance with family matters, and child-care training in a community Head Start program.

Conjugal visiting programs and family relations programs should go hand in hand. So far, at least seven states (Mississippi, California, New York, Minnesota, Connecticut, Washington, and South Carolina) have developed such programs. In Mississippi's Parchman, where conjugal visiting originated in the United States, they have a program that allows for more contact than any other prison in the nation. Currently, a family may visit for three days and two nights, usually Friday through Sunday. The family stays in apartments specifically designed for such visits. A family visit usually occurs every two months.

California has 90 family visiting units on the grounds of the state's 12 correctional institutions. The New York Family Reunion Program allows for both the nuclear and extended family to visit. South

Carolina, Minnesota, Connecticut and Washington also have family relations programs.

In a few states, institutions are beginning to again allow infants to stay with their mothers. Ohio and North Carolina have newborns in their institutional hospitals for short periods until outside arrangements can be made. Infants born during incarceration are allowed to stay up to one year in New York and up to eighteen months in Florida. Recently, the courts in California activated an old law which allows young children to remain with their imprisoned mothers. California is also looking into alternatives to incarceration of mothers. In Santa Clara County, for example, inmate mothers are housed in apartments. The mothers work or receive job training during the day while the children attend school or day care. The program stresses responsibility and offers guidance and assistance in employment, household management, and child care.

It is hopeful that recent months have seen so many new programs which might point the way toward a better future. Clearly, research and public relations must play important roles in the implementation of new parent-child oriented corrections. Publicity is as important as research because the majority of citizens do not know what prisons do to the families of people who are sent there.

If corrections programs in America are going to be designed with the intention of truly helping society, then they must be arranged so innocent children are not made to suffer. When a parent goes to prison, it is the child who suffers the most devastating consequences in the long-run. Corrections of the future must look to the family and not away from it for answers.

TABLE I

STUDIES INVOLVING CHILDREN OF INMATES

RESEARCHER	YEAR	PLACE	# OF INMATES	# OF MALE	# OF FEMALE	# OF FAMILIES	# OF CHILDREN	# OF MALE	# OF FEMALE
McCord	'30-'40	Massachusetts							
Zalba	'64	Los Angeles	124	0	124	124	303		
Morris	'65	England	653	653	0	653			
Moerk	'73	California	24	24	0	24	24	24	0
Schneller	'75	Washington, D.C.	93	93	0	93			
Sack	'75	Boston	6	6	0	6	24	15	9
Stanton	'76	San Francisco Bay Area	75*	0	75	75	166**		
Savage	'78	Washington, D.C.	60	0	60	60			
Fritsch & Burkhead	'79	Lexington, Kentucky	97	34	63	97	124	48	78

*54 of these women were in county jails, 21 were on probation.

**118 had mothers in jail, 49 had mothers on probation.

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